



**VISITOR SATISFACTION AND
VISITOR UNDERSTANDING OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF
ACADIA NATIONAL PARK: 2003**

Meeting the Requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act



**Charles Jacobi, Natural Resource Specialist
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SUMMARY

In 2003, the National Park Service measured visitor satisfaction and visitor understanding of the significance of the park they were visiting through a brief visitor survey. Acadia National Park participated in this survey, which was intended to meet the requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). The response rate for the survey was 22%.

In a brief report, the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit presented the results of visitor evaluations of park facilities, services, and recreation opportunities (GPRA goal IIa1) at Acadia. One hundred percent of visitors were satisfied with the overall quality of visitor facilities, services, and recreation opportunities offered by Acadia. This was above the 2003 GPRA servicewide goal of 95%. Responses to questions about the quality of specific facilities or services showed there is room for limited improvement.

Visitor responses to the question about the significance of Acadia National Park (GPRA goal IIb1) were compared to significance statements identified in the park's GPRA plan. According to servicewide standards for evaluating answers to this question (visitor identification of at least one park significance item), 92% of Acadia visitors understand something about the significance of Acadia. This is well above the 2003 GPRA servicewide goal of 84%. Seventy one percent of visitors knew Acadia was significant for its scenery and 31% percent knew it was significant for its recreation opportunities. Fifteen percent of visitors knew Acadia was significant for its cultural heritage and 11% knew it was significant for its natural resources.

When given the opportunity to make other comments, visitors offered the following (among many others): ranger programs were excellent; Jordan Pond trail work is great; park map and trail signs and marking could be improved; and the busses are great. There were few comments about crowding and congestion or resource management activities.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the National Park Service (NPS) measured visitor satisfaction and visitor understanding of the significance of Acadia National Park through a brief survey card administered to a representative sample of visitors. Satisfaction and understanding of significance had been identified as two important servicewide goals established by the NPS to satisfy the requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA).

In this report, data from the Visitor Survey Card Data Report (see Appendix 1) prepared by the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit will be reviewed briefly. The Idaho report presents the results of very general visitor evaluations of park facilities, services, and recreational opportunities. We also present and analyze the results for the open-ended part of the survey card that asks visitors to tell why Acadia is significant and to give any other comments they wish.

METHODS

The University of Idaho established survey methods for all park units. At Acadia, four hundred survey cards were distributed on eight days between August 1 and August 31, at eight different locations (fifty cards for each). The locations have stayed the same since beginning the GPRA surveys in 1998. Distribution of cards was evenly divided between weekends and weekdays, and between two blocks of time, 8:00 a.m. to noon and 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Locations, days, dates, and times are shown in Table 1.

We selected sampling sites mainly for their high visitation, but there were several other considerations. Because of the division of the park and Mount Desert Island into an east and west side, we chose five locations on the more heavily visited east side and two on the less visited west side. The eighth location was made up of both Blackwoods Campground on the east side and Seawall Campground on the west side. All fifty survey cards were distributed in Blackwoods this year by mistake. No survey cards were distributed in Seawall.

Three locations on the east side were high use frontcountry sites. The other two locations were high use backcountry trail and carriage road sites. The carriage road intersection selected was between the high and low use areas on the carriage road system (see Jacobi and Manning 1997). The trail junction selected represents moderately difficult to difficult trails with high use. One of the high use frontcountry sites on the east side, Jordan Pond, was selected because of the concession there and the multitude of activities available (hiking, biking, and boating). On the west side, Echo Lake Beach was selected because it is a high use frontcountry area. The primary activity there is visiting the beach and a secondary activity is hiking. Ship Harbor and Wonderland Trails were selected because they are easy trails and they represent the frontcountry users of the Rt. 102A corridor with its easily accessible park attractions.

National protocols for distribution of survey cards call for contacting visitors on a frequency of every third person or vehicle if more than 100 persons or vehicles were expected in the four hours, and every person or vehicle if less than 100 visitors were expected in the four hours (see

Table 1). This protocol was followed with the following exceptions. Where vehicular or foot traffic was heavy, we spread surveys out over the entire 4-hour period, instead of every third party. A time interval every five minutes of was used. Distribution was also adjusted from every third group to every group or vice versa when flows were inconsistent. Two hundred surveys were distributed by the Recreation Intern. Each Ridgerunner distributed 50.

TABLE 1: LOCATION, DAY, AND TIME FOR 2003 GPRA CARD DISTRIBUTION.

Location	Date/Day	Time	Frequency
Entrance Station	8/02/03, Saturday	8:00 – 12:00	12/hour
Echo Lake Beach parking lot	8/03/03, Sunday	1:00 – 5:00	3rd
Visitor Center	8/04/03, Monday	8:00 – 12:00	12/hour
Jordan Pond Area parking lots	8/07/03, Thursday	1:00 – 5:00	12/hour, all lots
Ship Harbor/Wonderland Trails	8/09/03, Saturday	1:00 – 5:00	every
Blackwoods Campground	8/10/03, Sunday	8:00 – 12:00	BW 3rd
Beehive and Bowl Trail Jct.	8/12/03, Tuesday	1:00 – 5:00	every
Intersection 10, carriage roads	8/14/03, Thursday	8:00 – 12:00	3rd

RESULTS

VISITOR SATISFACTION (GPRA GOAL IIA1)

The data presented in Visitor Survey Card Data Report from the University of Idaho report is mostly self-explanatory (see Appendix 1 for details). The response rate was 22% (88/400 survey cards). This rate is comparable to similar survey cards in the private sector and is considered adequate. The most important result was that 100% of visitors were satisfied overall with the quality of appropriate facilities, services, and recreation opportunities. This is above the National Park Service 2003 GPRA goal of 95%. The data are accurate to plus or minus 6% with 95% confidence. This means that if different samples had been drawn, the results would have been similar (+/- 6%) 95 out of 100 times.

Visitor satisfaction with restroom facilities, exhibits, learning about nature, history, or culture and commercial services in the park had the lowest overall evaluation scores (4.1 to 4.4 on a scale of 1 to 5). A score of 4 out of 5 is still very good.

SIGNIFICANCE OF ACADIA (GPRA GOAL IIB1)

One of the open-ended survey questions asked, “What is the special significance of this park?” Visitors could respond by writing in as many items as they wished. Their answers were classified according to a series of four significance statements prepared for the Acadia National Park GPRA plan (National Park Service 1997). We revised these significance statements slightly based on visitor responses in 1998 and 2001 (2001 revisions are in italics below). These significance statements were followed closely. Exact wording was not necessary, but the concept had to be readily apparent from the visitor’s choice of words. This was not always

obvious or easy, but most statements clearly fell into one category. If a statement contained one or more ideas that were different, both were used in the analysis.

1. **Outstanding scenery** – glaciated coastal and island landscape – mountains meet the sea – highest topography along the East coast of North America – Somes Sound the only fjord in the continental U.S. – *geography* – preservation from development, especially the coastline – geology (as relates to topography) – tides.
2. **Recreation Opportunities** – many activities available – carriage roads, trails, hiking, biking, boating – scenic motor roads – park accessible to all users – public shoreline access – peace/quiet/solitude – *learning/education*.
3. **Rich cultural heritage** – Native American history – French and British settlement – history of park formation, large land donations, visible proponents of conservation –historic hiking trails – historic carriage roads.
4. **Biological/Ecological (Natural) resources** – any mention of flora or fauna - exceptionally high biological diversity – presence of numerous rare species – unique mix of plant species that are at their northern and southern range limits – abundant wetlands – variety of habitats and communities – *clean air and water*.

We counted the number of surveys with any response related to significance, even if it was not included in our significance statements. Responses not related to significance and non-responses were discarded from analysis. Of the responses related to significance, we then counted those matching at least one of the four significance statements. Ninety-two percent of surveys with responses to this question had at least one match (66/72). This is above the National Park Service 2003 GPRA goal of 84%. The percentage of surveys with one, two, three, or four matches are shown in Table 2. Results from previous years are included for comparison.

**TABLE 2: PERCENT OF RESPONSES MATCHING
ONE, TWO, THREE, OR FOUR ACADIA SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENTS***

Number of Matches	1998 (n=81)	1999 (n=126)	2000 (n=94)	2001 (n=72)	2002 (n=68)	2003 (n=72)
At least one match	82%	89%	91%	94%	93%	92%
At least two matches	21%	36%	39%	42%	33%	32%
At least three matches	1%	4%	3%	4%	0%	4%
Four matches	0%	<1%	0%	0%	0%	0%

*The percentages in Table 2 do not add up to 100 because visitors could give multiple answers.

Six years of data consistently show that visitors most often recognize Acadia is significant for its scenery, followed by recognition of its recreation opportunities. Recognition of the park's rich cultural heritage and natural resources is much less common. Table 3 shows the details. Appendix 2 contains the verbatim significance responses.

TABLE 3: PERCENT OF RESPONSES WITH SPECIFIC MATCHES TO ACADIA SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENTS FOR SCENERY, RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES, CULTURAL HERITAGE, AND NATURAL RESOURCES*

Significance Statements	1998 (n=81)	1999 (n=112)	2000 (n=94)	2001 (n=72)	2002 (n=68)	2003 (n=72)
Scenery	67%	74%	74%	82%	67%	71%
Recreation	31%	40%	33%	29%	34%	31%
Cultural Heritage	3%	9%	15%	10%	14%	15%
Natural Resources	6%	8%	14%	8%	12%	11%

*The percentages in Table 3 do not add up to 100 because visitors could give multiple answers.

SUMMARY OF OTHER COMMENTS

Visitors provided many comments in the final section of the survey card. We established eight categories of comments as described below and grouped comments in the appropriate categories, although there is always a little judgment involved in this. Multiple/independent comments on each survey were classified separately. Under each heading, visitor comments are reported verbatim. A semi-colon separates the comments of each individual.

Facilities and Services

Wild Garden was good; We especially enjoyed the rangers' enthusiasm, knowledge, and personalities; The ranger led programs were outstanding; Please improve the cleanliness of the bathrooms; Thanks for the work at Jordan Pond to make that beautiful area more accessible. The east shore trail improvements are great; The rangers were extremely helpful; Don L.- park ranger was very helpful and very knowledgeable about the park; I love the relief map in the visitor center. Gives you a great overview; Scott was great at the Beehive; Visited Wonderland which was well kept, going to Park Loop Road soon; We had a wonderful ranger tour-Journey Through the Forest on Tuesday August 5-the ranger was wonderful;

Facilities and Services Needed

Visitor Center needed more exhibits; Sand Beach should have a full shower available and bathroom facilities must be done over; Sometimes maps of trails and such were not clear; Park map should contain more information about the points of interest in the park; There needs to be a sign for the trailhead of Great Head at the eastern edge of Sandy Beach; Bike trails are much needed on Park Loop Road, or allow bikes to ride in both directions, why not decrease traffic by making it easier for biking; Blackwoods Campground should have direct access to carriage road system; I use carriage trails for biking a lot, parking at Eagle Lake is very limited; Finding food (groceries) in the area is not easy; Campground bathrooms need to be updated; More could be done to improve the information about the trails and the information on some of the directions on the trails; I have never seen a ranger pick up any trash or remove dog dung from a trail. I clean Wonderland almost every day; Need better marking for trails on summits of mountains- they are hard to find; We felt that the road signs in the park were inadequate;

Concessions

The food and service at Jordan Pond is outstanding;

Campgrounds

Electrical hookups sites available; and please add hot showers to Blackwoods Campground;

Resource Management

Why are boats allowed in Jordan Pond but not people? Boats spew exhaust and gas into the water. People seem relatively harmless compared to that. It makes no sense;

Congestion/Crowding/Visitor Experience

I enjoyed the easy and peaceful walks near the coast. Advertise the cool climate; Recommend no snowmobiles on carriage roads or bridle paths; Provides outstanding hiking for the entire family, wonderful national park; (We enjoyed) the new bus service; Exceptional, even in the fog; Carriage roads are awesome; Too crowded; The park is very user friendly; Too crowded, do more to discourage auto traffic; You need a bike lane between Jordan Pond and Route 233; More climbing opportunities; My family has come here over 30 years. We believe bicyclists are becoming a nuisance-local people are getting angry over traffic delays caused by this; We loved that it was pet friendly. It is one of the few places we can take our dog camping and explore the park;

Buses

Bus service in park is a great idea; Bus system very good and cars are not needed, Thank you, Thank you; We plan to use the Explorer more-it is so easy to get around on it-great idea; More busses needed;

General Impressions

Excellent park; I fell in love with Acadia and this area and plan to come here every summer from now on; Worth our trip; No, we absolutely loved it; Our favorite place to visit,! Clean, shows respect for people and nature; It is a beautiful sight; Much better than I anticipated; For someone used to western parks it's a bit disappointing, but still provides a worthwhile experience; Absolutely awesome; We have visited most national parks in the country and this remains at the top of the list; Park is beautiful; Acadia was a wonderful park to visit, we enjoyed it tremendously; We like it a lot and have been here six years in a row; We love Acadia and come very year. Everything about the park is magnificent and excellent; Acadia is one of our favorite parks. This was our fifth time; Thanks for all your hard work; Thanks a lot for maintaining the landscape;

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2003 GPRA survey showed that Acadia National Park met the national goals for satisfaction (IIa1 - 95%) and significance (IIb1 - 84%). As with “significance” in previous surveys, it is clear the park should focus on improving visitor understanding of the significance of our biological resources and rich cultural heritage. Visitors know Acadia is significant for its

scenery and recreation opportunities. Inclusion of our mission statement in as many presentations and publications as possible and posting it prominently in public contact areas is one of many actions that may help with this.

REFERENCES

Jacobi, C. and R. Manning

- 1997 Applying the visitor experience resource protection process to Acadia National Park carriage roads: A summary of research and decision-making. Technical Report NPS/NESO-RNR/NRTR/98-5. December 1997. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service. New England System Support Office. 23pp.

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- 1997 Strategic management plans: Acadia National Park, St. Croix Island International Historic Site, Maine Acadian Culture Project. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service. 72pp.

**APPENDIX 1: ACADIA NP 2002 VISITOR SURVEY CARD DATA REPORT
(UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO)**

APPENDIX 2: SIGNIFICANCE COMMENTS

These are reported verbatim. Numbers refer to numbered response cards. Particularly interesting comments are highlighted in italics by the author.

1. Your transportation is great. Keep up the good job. It helps to observe the American taiga.
2. Only “mountains’ at the sea on the east coast incredible wilds accessible by East to bicycle trails.
3. The national significance of this park is that it preserves some of the most beautiful land in our country and part of our national history (carr. roads).
4. The pristine coastline where mountain meets sea, and the carriage road system.
5. It’s shoreline and mountains – beautiful!
6. history of island, beautiful rocky coast, *several different habitats*.
7. It preserves public access to a unique area of the eastern USA. *Without this public preservation this would be a gated community of the rich.*
8. The cumulation of oceans forests, mountains, ponds, lakes, and wildlife all in one place.
9. Shows Maine coastline in its natural setting.
10. America the beautiful – we need to preserve it.
11. Restoring a beautiful spot.
12. preservation of our natural beauty.
13. preserve the natural beauty of the coast of Maine.
14. It connects us to our history – geological, political, cultural, and industrial. And its public availability is the essence of our democratic ideal.
15. all its beauty
16. Acadia epitomizes the coastal beauty of Maine, and provides an opportunity for many people to experience it.
17. it is symbolic of the preservation of beauty for the masses – not certain groups who do not have the resources to even camp, but so many of us who would not otherwise be able to vacation and appreciate such amazing nature.
18. Access to ocean – history of previous use – peaceful coexistence of man nature, water, boats (public and private).
19. Preserving a beautiful coastal area from commercial encroachment so visitors can know and enjoy its unique beauty and features.
20. Its significance is that *it is one of the few great untouched forests in the country*. It should remain so.
21. Acadia is a great way to experience Maine’s rocky coast, beautiful scenery, and vast landscape.
22. The great outdoors of Maine. Carriage roads, hiking, biking.
23. A very good chance to see the rugged coastline New England.
24. Preserving open space.
25. Outstanding park. One of the best in the system. Its national significance is its carriage roads.
26. Reminder to people to see the beauty of nature and the importance of protecting our environment before it is gone from us.

27. *Future generations* and current visitors have a chance to see one of nature's most beautiful places.
28. Unique landscape (rocky coastline, granite, Somes Sound)
29. It serves as a piece of preserved natural area encompassing sites important to the early history of the region.
30. The 1st national park east of the Mississippi it is a fine example of private/public cooperation saving pristine scenery from commercial over development.
31. Beauty and recreation opportunities.
32. Proximity of mountains to ocean location on East Coast near major population centers, short hikes provide great views (weather permitting...)
33. the preservation of its exquisite beauty! *The availability of many accessible trail and carriage roads to the average walker/hiker*
34. It shows a part of the beauty and wealth of our country.
35. The national significance is how significant donations of land and money were donated to all people of the nation *making us stewards of the park.*
36. Providing a place for people to get out and enjoy the woods. Nature instills appreciation for natural resources.
37. Conservation of pristine shores, beautiful mountains – historic past – carriage roads. Forest vegetation is awesome.
38. Natural beauty.
39. One of the most beautiful places with some of the best variety of hiking I've seen.
40. Its beauty and uniqueness.
41. Carriage roads set up by Rockefeller. The only island off mainland with mountains.
42. Natural beauty.
43. Unusual beauty, varied terrain.
44. Beautiful environment and scenery, natural resources, animals, plants etc.
45. Acadia is preservation of what the northeast coast is compared to other national parks out west.
46. The variety of terrain and sights in a small area.
47. Unique environment on East Coast. Carriage trails are major attraction.
48. nature-large contribution to the beauty of our nation.
49. natural beauty and easy access to trails, walkways and ponds.
50. Preservation of natural areas for all to see and visit.
51. Acquaintance with history.
52. Great beauty to be shared by all.
53. having places that preserve the natural beauty of this nation, like Acadia, are so important. We need to be reminded of the simple beauty and land which formed the origin of this nation.
54. It is important to preserve and protect parts of our country for everyone to enjoy.
55. preserves the natural beauty of the eastern coastline in a way unique to the nation.
56. It is a uniquely beautiful natural environment enhanced by opportunities for an enormous variety of recreation opportunities.
57. First east coast park. Unique geography.
58. An opportunity to see the ecosystem of Maine.
59. The beautiful scenery and trails.
60. Preserving the natural beauty of the area.

61. Preservation of this beautiful area for the enjoyment of *future generations*.
62. *Preservation of wildlife and woodlands*.
63. Beautiful and unique combination of water, mountains, and history.
64. It represents the beauty and good of our nation. Peacefulness and purity.
65. 1st place to see the sunrise. Small and comfortable to visit. Our 21st year to visit and still find much to do.
66. It represents an opportunity to enjoy coastal New England at its best.

Responses made that do not match significance statements.

68. A very important asset to our country. Please conserve this wonderful park for future generations.
69. One of the jewels of the nation.
70. Invaluable
71. National treasure.
72. Thank God for John D. Rockefeller Jr.
73. "A National Legacy for Future Generations." I came here as a child for years and now bring my children.

Responses made that do not relate to significance statements.

None.